

07/21/21 Wednesday

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Where's the Rage for Israel and NSO's Pegasus the West Had for China's Huawei?
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Anger has swirled around the globe over revelations that Pegasus spyware created by Israeli software firm NSO Group has been used by governments to wiretap journalists and public figures. However, the fury is mild when compared to claims Beijing compelled Huawei to put a "backdoor" into its phones, which has never been proven.

Earlier this week, a group of news outlets including the Washington Post and [Forbidden Stories](#), along with human rights group Amnesty International, revealed disturbing findings: governments around the globe have been buying up Pegasus spyware from NSO Group and using it to spy on journalists, public figures, and even other world leaders.

50,000 Phones Targeted

Thousands of phone numbers are on the list, with some of the biggest names including French President Emmanuel Macron and Moroccan journalists Omar Radi, both allegedly wiretapped by Morocco, and journalist Jamal Khashoggi, allegedly wiretapped by his native Saudi Arabia prior to being killed by a Saudi hit squad at the Saudi consulate in October 2019.

In all, 180 journalists were targeted in 20 countries, including Kazakhstan, India, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Hungary, Morocco, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mexico, Egypt, Algeria, Togo, Turkey, France, Spain and the United Kingdom. They also targeted at least 65 business executives, 85 human rights activists, 189 journalists, and more than 600 politicians and government officials, including high-level officials like cabinet ministers, diplomats, and military officers, according to [The Washington Post](#).

Also on the list were 10 prime ministers, three presidents, and one king, including Iraqi President Barham Salih, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, the prime ministers of Pakistan, Egypt, and Morocco, and seven former heads of government from Lebanon, Uganda, and Belgium, and several other countries.

Shalev Hulio, NSO's chief executive and co-founder, has cast the story as flimsy, but [said the company](#) is "investigating every allegation ... and if we find that it is true, we will take strong action."

"NSO Group's technologies have helped prevent terror attacks, gun violence, car explosions and suicide bombings. NSO Group is on a lifesaving mission and the company will faithfully execute this mission undeterred, despite any and all continued attempts to discredit it on false grounds," the company [told the US Public Broadcasting Service](#).

On Wednesday, the firm put out a press release saying "enough is enough," announcing it would cease responding to media inquiries about what it called a "vicious and slanderous campaign."

“NSO is a technology company. We do not operate the system, nor do we have access to the data of our customers, yet they are obligated to provide us with such information under investigations,” the company added.

The Israeli [government has confirmed](#) it “approves the export of cyber products exclusively to governmental entities, for lawful use, and only for the purpose of preventing and investigating crime and counterterrorism, under end use /end user certificates provided by the acquiring government. In cases where exported items are used in violation of export licenses or end use certificates, appropriate measures are taken.”

However, it denied having any knowledge of the use of Pegasus to spy on other targets, and noted to the Post that “Israel does not have access to the information gathered by NSO’s clients.”

That said, a former senior US national security official who has worked closely with the Israeli security services [also told the outlet](#) “It’s crazy to think that NSO wouldn’t share sensitive national security information with the government of Israel. That doesn’t mean they’re a front for the Israeli security agencies, but governments around the world assume that NSO is working with Israel.”

How Have Nations Reacted?

Representatives from many of the nations implicated in the investigation have unanimously denied the reports they spied on journalists, dissidents, and world figures, insisting their governments are based on the rule of law. However, it’s notable that not all of the countries where journalists were targeted have been [asked for comment](#), with France, Spain, and the UK being notable exceptions.

Asked by [The Hindu](#), a White House spokesperson said on Wednesday that “The United States condemns the harassment or extrajudicial surveillance of journalists, human rights activists, or other perceived regime critics.”

However, despite the admission by NSO that it sells such software and by Israel that it, at the very least, approved of each sale, and in light of comments by foreign intelligence officials that Israel likely materially benefitted from the affair by gleaning information from the group, it seems that a bigger scandal would be expected. But not a single government has demanded punishment for either NSO or Israel, or decried even the possibility that Israel helped countries wiretap people not suspected of criminal actions, or raised fears that a country’s government likely got ahold of classified information from them via illegal means.

There have been no calls for sanctions against Israel or NSO or any senior figures at NSO, or prosecutions, or frankly even acknowledgements that the affair is even happening outside of dry-mouthed condemnations. In fact, the only calls for sanctions have been by journalists themselves, such as the Intercept’s Ryan Grim and Electronic Intifada’s Ali Abuminah.

The reactions - and lack thereof - stand in stark comparison to how Chinese tech giant Huawei has been treated.

Huawei Crucified Without Evidence

Shenzhen-based Huawei is the world’s largest manufacturer of both telecommunications equipment and smartphones and a major supplier of 5G internet service. The company was started in 1987 by Ren Zhengfei, a former Chinese military engineer, although he owns less than 2% of its shares, which are owned by Huawei employees.

The US has claimed for years that Ren's military experience and membership in the Communist Party of China make Huawei a security liability, but in 2018 a more concerted effort began aimed at forcing US military and government agencies from using products by Huawei and another Chinese phone maker, ZTE, claiming that the CPC had forced Huawei to insert a secret "back door" into its phones and networks, enabling the Chinese government to spy on users if so desired.

The company and the Chinese government have both denied that such a backdoor does or even could exist or that they would pursue one if it were possible.

"If they believe there's a backdoor, they should offer evidence to prove it," Huawei chairman [Liang Hua challenged](#) US intelligence in January 2019. At the time, Washington said it didn't need to, citing Huawei's alleged proximity to the Chinese government as sufficient proof.

However, as the US began hounding allies in Germany and the "Five Eyes" nations to drop Huawei's technologies, it did begin providing them with evidence to support its claims - [evidence London](#), Berlin, and Paris all said [wasn't very convincing](#). Still, within months each of them had either rejected bids by Huawei or suddenly found new evidence to justify falling into line with US demands.

The firm was [placed on a US blacklist](#) in 2019, requiring Americans to obtain a special license from the US Department of Commerce before doing business with Huawei, effectively banning Americans from buying Huawei's phones, and several nations have now sanctioned Huawei as well. The company's CFO, [Meng Wanzhou](#), was also arrested in Canada in connection with charges in a US court that aren't related to the espionage allegations but which are widely seen as further persecution of the company.

The sanctions had their effect, too: in March, a [first-quarter earnings report](#) showed its sales down 16.5% year-on, part of a trend that caused it to sell its Honor smartphone marquee last year.

Legacy of Israeli Spying on Allies

In September 2019, [Politico reported](#) that US government officials had concluded Israel was responsible for placing cell phone surveillance devices called "Stingrays" around Washington, DC, and had even used them to spy on White House communications. A former senior official used as a source for the article said the devices were likely intended to spy specifically on then-US President Donald Trump, a known lover of his iPhone.

Then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [dismissed the report](#), saying, "Israel doesn't conduct espionage operations in the United States, period."

However, the claims go back much further. In 1985, US intelligence [analyst Jonathan Pollard](#) was arrested, charged, and later convicted of espionage after he passed classified US Navy documents to Israel, including dirt on Israel's Arab neighbors, for \$1,500 a month.

Israel also spied on then-US Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014 and 2015 during negotiations for what became the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, according to reports [by Der Spiegel](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#).

In 2017, [Le Monde revealed](#) that Israel's Mossad had penetrated the French intelligence directorate in what it called Operation Ratafia, with the goal of developing close relationships with fellow spies "to the point of crossing the line of turning them into double agents."

None of these brought calls for sanctions, either, revealing how politically motivated the attacks on Huawei and other Chinese tech firms really are. Why does the West continue to tolerate the Israeli government spying on them and their citizens?

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Pentagon Reevaluating Security Around 'Nuclear Football' After Capitol Rioters Almost Grabbed It

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After it was revealed that rioters inside the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, were within moments of potentially laying their hands on the United States' nuclear launch codes, the Pentagon ordered a review of its policies concerning the device, commonly known as the "nuclear football."

Its formal name is the Presidential Emergency Satchel - the 45-pound briefcase the US President or Vice President would use to order the use of nuclear weapons, should the unfortunate situation come to pass. If necessary, a nuclear weapon or weapons could be launched in as little as two minutes' time. It's carried by an aide-de-camp whenever one of the executives is away from a permanent command post, such as when former US Vice President Mike Pence went to the US Capitol on January 6 to fulfill his duties as President of the Senate in the certification of Electoral College voting results from the November 2020 election.

Then-US President [Donald Trump's supporters](#), intent on forestalling certification of a victory by Joe Biden that they - and Trump - had deemed to be illegitimate, fell upon Capitol Police in the thousands, breaching the building and temporarily scattering Congress. Lawmakers scrambled to safety as police officers struggled with [pro-rioter sympathy](#) in the ranks. Security camera footage from the event shows that at one point, the insurrectionists were [within just 100 feet](#) of Pence and his entourage and chanting "Hang Mike Pence." Outside, a gallows was being erected.

[According to CNN](#), US Strategic Command, which is responsible for operating the nuclear weapons arsenal, only became fully aware of the danger weeks later, when security camera footage shown during Trump's impeachment trial for allegedly egging on the attack was aired. Kingston Reif, an expert on nuclear weapons policy at the nonpartisan Arms Control Association, told CNN in early February that "The risk associated with the insurrectionists getting their hands on Pence's football wasn't that they could have initiated an unauthorized launch. But had they stolen the football and acquired its contents, which include pre-planned nuclear strike options, they could have shared the contents with the world."

Since Trump was commander-in-chief, only he could actually order a nuclear strike, unless he was compromised and Pence rose to fill his office. Pence was also accompanied by several armed Secret Service bodyguards, who would undoubtedly have given their lives to defend the VP and the nuclear football, but even they wouldn't have been able to hold back a determined assault by the rioters.

"Such an outcome would have been a security breach of almost incomprehensible proportions," Reif added, "and it ought to raise further questions about the rationale for the anachronism that is the football."

It would seem the Department of Defense Inspector General agrees: [a Monday memo](#) to the director of the Joint Staff and director of the White House Military Office notes the IG will begin an evaluation of the Pentagon's notification procedures for the nuclear football before the month is out.

"The objective of this evaluation is to determine the extent that DoD processes and procedures are in place and adequate to alert DoD officials in the event that the Presidential Emergency Satchel is lost, stolen, or compromised," the memo states. "This evaluation will also determine the adequacy of the procedures the DoD has developed to respond to such an event."

Five people died during the assault on the Capitol, but the rioters ultimately failed to capture the Electoral College ballots or any lawmakers or other officials, and were soon driven from the building. Thousands of US troops, whose absence from the Capitol grounds was [itself a scandal](#) suggesting sympathy for the insurrection inside the Pentagon, were soon positioned across downtown Washington, DC, and remained on station for several months amid ongoing claimed threats.

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Videos: Syrian Air Defenses Repel 'Aggression' in Sky Over Homs Governorate, State Media Report
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to Syrian state television and local reports, Syrian anti-air defenses were engaging hostile targets over the central city of Homs early on Thursday morning, which were identified as Israeli.

Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported, citing a Syrian military source, that the attack was launched by aircraft northeast of Beirut, Lebanon, and aimed at targets across the Homs countryside near Al-Qusayr.

Syrian broadcaster Al-Ikhbariya reported after the attack that Syrian air defense systems had successfully down most of the rockets fired by Israel.

Several videos posted on social media show anti-air missiles streaking toward undefined aerial targets. It's unclear if they are targeting incoming missiles or aircraft overhead.

According to reports, some of the missiles struck [targets near Safita](#), a city in Tartous Governorate, to the west of Homs. [Some reports](#) also said that Shayrat Air Base, which is southeast of Homs, was also a target.

The US also notably launched a large cruise missile strike against Shayrat in April 2017 in response to an alleged chemical weapons attack on the town of Khan Shaykhun, in Idlib Governorate, which was later revealed to [have been staged](#) by the al-Qaeda-aligned White Helmets group.

A missile also reportedly fell near the Lebanese town of Majdel el-Koura, about 30 miles south of the Syrian border. It's unclear what type of missile, whether it was a cruise missile that fell short or an anti-air missile that overshot its target, as happened [earlier this year](#) when an S-200 missile fell in central Israel following another Israeli attack.

Israel has made no comment on the events in Syria. In the past, it has claimed its attacks on Syrian territory are aimed at Iranian personnel and equipment, whom it says are planning to attack Israel.

Thursday's strikes are the [second by Israel](#) this week: an air attack on late Monday into early Tuesday struck targets near Aleppo, in northern Syria. Both attacks have come during Eid al-Adha, a week-long family holiday celebrated by Muslims to remember the obedience of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son Ishmael because God commanded him to.

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Ukraine's Naftogaz Chief Claims Russia Won't Renew Gas Transit Deal After 2024
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Yuriy Vitrenko, head of Ukraine's state-owned gas company Naftogaz, said Wednesday that Russia intended to stop pumping gas through pipelines that pass through Ukraine after 2024, when the present contract expires.

Vitrenko said that Russian President Vladimir Putin is "is now using gas as a geopolitical weapon against Ukraine and the whole region."

"Since our concerns are for example first and foremost about the security, NATO membership would probably address this security concern," he added.

His comments come amid news the United States has [reached a deal](#) with Germany to avert sanctioning the NATO ally, which is also where the terminus of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia will be. Ukraine and Poland have claimed the gas line, which goes around their territory via an undersea route, is a danger to their security.

Under the deal, Berlin and Washington will support a 10-year extension of the Russia-Ukraine gas transit agreement, which expires in 2024 and provides Kiev with billions of dollars in transit fees.

The deal also provides for Germany to invest between \$175 million and \$1 billion in a "Green Fund for Ukraine." German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Twitter on Wednesday that Germany "will support Ukraine in creating a green energy sector and will work to ensure gas transit through Ukraine in the next decade."

The US has long sought to block completion of the pipeline, but presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden both averted sanctioning Germany or German institutions - although noting they reserve the right to, a right German officials don't agree with. Nonetheless, the gas line is essentially complete, having cost \$11 billion to construct.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who doesn't share Biden's fears about Russia using Nord Stream 2 as leverage over Western Europe, said Wednesday she spoke with Putin over the phone about Nord Stream 2 hours before the agreement was announced. She has previously

said that [sanctions are an adequate](#) tool to push back with if Moscow does try to weaponize the pipeline, which will carry 55 billion cubic meters of gas each year from Siberia to Western Europe.

Anatoly Antonov, Russia's ambassador to the United States, said Wednesday that accusations Russia is using energy for political pressure is unfair competition.

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CIA Chief Picks Veteran Who Led Bin Laden Hunt to Head 'Havana Syndrome' Task Force
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US-Cuba tensions reached a new intensity in late 2016 after US diplomats stationed in Havana, Cuba, began reporting a variety of odd symptoms that included hearing loss, dizziness and cognitive difficulties. Although the source of the so-called "Havana Syndrome" remains elusive, one US report claimed directed radio energy emissions were to blame.

The head of the US Central Intelligence Agency has selected an officer who took the lead in the hunt for Osama bin Laden to serve as the point person for the agency's ongoing effort to pinpoint the causes of the since dubbed "Havana Syndrome."

Citing current and former agency officials familiar with the developments, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on Wednesday that CIA Director William Burns made his pick as part of a larger push to "quicken" the agency's investigation.

The identity of the chosen officer has not yet been publicly released.

One source familiar with the new lead on the investigation told the Journal that the individual had spent more than 10 years reviewing intelligence analysis and targeting, and examining bin Laden and his affiliated networks.

At present, the task force is composed of a wide ranging group of specialists, such as intelligence analysts, clinicians, undercover agents and human resource specialists, sources revealed.

The CIA's team of specialists has been led by career intelligence official Cynthia Rapp, who sources say opted to delay her retirement from the spy agency in order to help form the investigative ensemble.

Although reports of mysterious health symptoms began to emerge between late 2016 and into 2017, the task force itself was not formed by the CIA until December 2020. Additional probes were also launched by both the US Department of Defense and the State Department amid growing concerns that efforts were moving at a sluggish pace.

To date, the exact cause of the health symptoms have remained unclear despite a State Department-backed [report](#) by the National Academies of Sciences (NAS) suggesting that directed radio frequency energy was the culprit.

Disputing the NAS report, Cuban officials have [repeatedly rejected](#) the allegations, noting at the time that the conclusions seemed to be more of a hypothesis rather than "proven fact" since the "report does not provide scientific evidence."

The latest developments come as reports recently began to detail that similar health symptoms are emerging among US diplomats in Europe, specifically in [Vienna](#) and [Berlin](#), among other areas. Figures place the tally of affected individuals at about 200.

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Powerful Magnitude 6.8 Earthquake Shakes Panama, USGS Says
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Officials have indicated that the strong earthquake has not caused any fatalities, injuries or structural damage. Tsunami warnings have not been issued at present.

A powerful magnitude 6.8 earthquake shook much of Panama on Tuesday after striking just along the coastal waters at a depth of 33 kilometers.

The US Geological Survey [detailed](#) that the quake was detected just 80 kilometers south of Panama's Punta de Burica, a coastal peninsula that stretches along the Pacific border between Panama and neighboring Costa Rica. Prior to being downgraded to a magnitude 6.8, officials recorded the quake at a magnitude 7.0.

Officials have indicated the quake has not raised any threats of a tsunami.

Video shared online by users also showed that the earthquake rattling light fixtures in the Central American nation.

Following the initial earthquake, locals have [described](#) the event as being "short" and only lasting for a "few seconds." Records indicate that the quake was preceded by a magnitude 3.3 tremor.

Testimonies filed in to the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre detail that a second quake that weighed in at magnitude 4.6 was felt as far as some 217 kilometers from the epicenter, with residents in Barranco Adentro, Panama, noting that their home felt "as if it were going to shake right off its foundation," and their vehicle was seen "wildly rocking."

No reports of fatalities or injuries have emerged at present. Panama's Civil Protection Agency [relayed](#) to the public that while it is continuing to monitor the situation, it has not detected any structural damage to local infrastructure.

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'Enough is Enough!': Israeli NSO Group Blasts Spying Allegations as 'Slander'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Alarms were recently raised after a leaked list contained tens of thousands of phone numbers belonging to politicians, activists and journalists who were potentially targeted for surveillance by Israel's NSO Group, which developed the Pegasus spyware software licensed out to government agencies.

The Israeli NSO Group pushed back against the growing crowd of critics on Wednesday and firmly rejected any claims that it engaged in surveillance, underscoring that such allegations are being spread as part of a "slandorous campaign."

The company's statement came as media outlets and the human rights group Amnesty International recently revealed new findings that indicated governments around the globe were tapping the NSO Group's Pegasus spyware to spy on journalists and world leaders. Pegasus has the ability to hack into cell phones, read text messages, track one's location and even tap into the phone's camera and microphone without users suspecting any nefarious actions.

The tech firm stated in its Wednesday remarks that it had had enough of questions from media outlets inquiring about its Pegasus spyware software and the leaked list that contained the phone numbers of some 50,000 prominent individuals, including French President Emmanuel Macron, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa and Morocco's King Mohammed VI, among other figures.

"Enough is Enough! In light of the recent planned and well-orchestrated media campaign lead by Forbidden Stories and pushed by special interest groups, and due to the complete disregard of the facts, NSO is announcing it will no longer be responding to media inquiries on this matter and it will not play along with the vicious and slanderous campaign," the company stated.

"The list is not a list of targets or potential targets of Pegasus. The numbers in the list are not related to NSO group. Any claims that a name in the list is necessarily related to a Pegasus target or Pegasus potential target is erroneous and false."

The statement further noted that despite the media storm enveloping the company, the Israeli firm will continue "its mission of saving lives" and "helping governments around the world prevent terror attacks," among other efforts to combat trafficking and aid in emergency situations.

"NSO will thoroughly investigate any credible proof of misuse of its technologies, as we always had, and will shut down the system where necessary," the release underscored.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz previously remarked on Tuesday that while the Israeli government approves the "export of cyber products only to governments and only for legal use," the exchange is only greenlighted if it meets certain terms.

Israel Launches Task Force

Amid growing concerns of the alleged misuse of the Pegasus software, Israeli sources have indicated that Israel will be launching a task force in order to examine the validity of the allegations.

Citing sources, Reuters [reported](#) Wednesday that the task force could either be headed by the state's National Security Council, which answers directly to Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, or by senior defense and intelligence officials.

Earlier reports [suggested](#) the effort would also see the participation of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency or justice and foreign ministries.

Aside from heads of state, the list contained the names of some 65 business executives, 85 activists and over 180 journalists across 20 countries, some of which include Morocco, Egypt, Spain, the UK and the United Arab Emirates. The total number of politicians and government officials linked to the leaked list range in the several hundreds.

Although Chaim Gelfand, the chief compliance officer at NSO, [told](#) the Israeli i24 News outlet that Macron was “not a target” of any operations, the official did go on to suggest that investigators have come across “some cases” that have raised flags. However, he did not provide additional details on the matter.

Gelfand’s revelations followed weekend statements issued by Shalev Hulio, the chief executive and co-founder of NSO, who [told](#) the Washington Post that the list had no relevance to the tech firm.

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US Will Hold Off on Reopening Jerusalem Consulate Until Israel Passes Budget - Report by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US consulate in Jerusalem was closed to the public at the request of the Trump administration in 2019 as part of a larger effort to shift American outreach to the Palestinian community to the US Embassy in Israel. The consulate had primarily served the handling of relations with Palestinians.

The Biden administration will be postponing the reopening of the US Consulate in Jerusalem until after the Israeli government is able to successfully approve its budget, it was revealed on Wednesday.

One official [relayed](#) to the Times of Israel that the Biden White House agreed to delay the reopening effort in order to prevent the further destabilization of the Bennett administration, which has been at the center of an ongoing round of tug of war with former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet members.

American and Palestinian sources [informed](#) Axios that a government budget is not likely to pass until at least early November, a timeline that will be crucial for Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett should he want to hold onto his post for another year.

Palestinian officials have indicated that they are willing to accept the delayed opening so long as the building is in fact reopened once the budget clears the Israeli parliament. However, in the meantime, discussions regarding who will lead the American mission are ongoing within the US State Department.

The latest development comes on the heels of reports that previously detailed that both the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the prime minister’s office lobbied for the postponement.

Incidentally, a push to reopen the facility in Jerusalem was made by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during the last days of the Netanyahu administration. At the time, Netanyahu is said to have remarked that such a move would help him “score political points.”

Former US President Donald Trump shuttered the consulate in Jerusalem in 2019. At the time, the State Department explained the closure as part of the Trump White House’s efforts to “increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our diplomatic engagements and operations.”

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House Speaker Pelosi Rejects Recommendation of Republican Reps. Jordan, Banks for Jan. 6 Commission

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), minority leader for the US House of Representatives, said on Monday that he had recommended five GOP lawmakers to join the House-approved commission on the January 6 riot at the US Capitol building. McCarthy's selection included Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH), who openly opposed legislation on the bipartisan group's formation. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) detailed in a [Wednesday news release](#) that, despite McCarthy's recommendation, Jordan, as well as Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN), would not be approved to serve on the Select Committee on the January 6th insurrection.

"I have spoken with him this morning about the objections raised about Representatives Jim Banks and Jim Jordan and the impact their appointments may have on the integrity of the investigation," the House Speaker said in a quoted statement.

The other GOP lawmakers recommended - Reps. Rodney Davis (R-IL), Kelly Armstrong (R-ND) and Troy Nehls (R-TX) - will likely receive Pelosi's approval. McCarthy is now expected to issue two new recommendations.

Of the 13-member commission, eight individuals will be appointed by the House speaker, while the House minority leader may select five members to be considered for the group.

Pelosi notably tapped Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) earlier this month as one of her selections for the commission. Between the presumed six Republicans and seven Democrats on the panel, the commission will have a "bipartisan quorum."

The House speaker made multiple references to the "integrity of the investigation," but stopped short of explicitly enumerating her concerns about Banks and Jordan.

"Speaker Pelosi just admitted the obvious, that the Jan. 6 Select Committee is nothing more than a partisan political charade," [Jordan tweeted in response](#) to the House speaker's statement.

Banks issued a similar statement, dubbing the commission "a purely partisan exercise by the Democrats ... Nancy Pelosi's rejection of me and Jim Jordan shows once again she is the most partisan figure in America today."

McCarthy also weighed in on the matter, [telling reporters that Pelosi](#) was carrying out an "egregious abuse of power" that "will irreparably damage this institution."

"Unless Speaker Pelosi reverses course and seats all five Republican nominees, Republicans will not be party to their sham process and will instead pursue our own investigation of the facts," McCarthy threatened.

Jordan, a staunch supporter of former US President Donald Trump, and Cheney, a conservative values-driven GOP lawmaker who has critiqued 45's actions on January 6, represent two dominant factions of the Republican Party.

Late last month, Jordan, as well as other Republican heavyweights like [Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#), declared there are bigger issues for lawmakers to tackle. Jordan [has also suggested](#) that the commission would devolve into the third impeachment of Trump. Days after her GOP colleagues expressed their grievances with [legislation tied to the bipartisan group](#), Cheney accepted Pelosi's invitation to the 13-person commission and declared that she is "honored to serve."

"Our oath to the Constitution must be above partisan politics," she asserted.

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Harvey Weinstein Appears at LA Trial in Wheelchair, Pleads Not Guilty to Rape, Sexual Assault by [Evan Craighead](#)

Disgraced Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein was extradited from a New York state prison on Tuesday so that he could appear in a Los Angeles, California, court for his second rape-associated trial. Weinstein, now a registered sex offender, was sentenced last year to 23 years behind bars for sexual assault and rape.

Weinstein, 69, made his Los Angeles, California, courtroom debut on Wednesday and pleaded not guilty to four counts of both forcible rape and forcible oral copulation, as well as two counts of sexual battery via restraint and a single count of sexual penetration by use of force.

The charges relate to sexual assault allegations leveled by five women. The alleged attacks occurred between 2004 and 2013, according to [a news release from the LA County District Attorney's Office](#).

Prosecutors allege that one of the five women was raped by Weinstein on two separate occasions in November 2009 and November 2010.

Mark Werksman, attorney for the 69-year-old convicted rapist, told reporters on Wednesday that he is confident Weinstein will be acquitted because he has not been given a fair trial.

"They're baseless, they're from long, long ago, they're uncorroborated," Werkman said, [as reported by the Associated Press](#).

Werksman also informed reporters that he filed a health examination request for Weinstein, whose health has reportedly diminished.

"He's going blind in one eye," the attorney claimed.

Weinstein, who appeared in a wheelchair, remained relatively silent during his LA court appearance. He reportedly spoke once - to thank Judge Sergio Tapia for his well-wishes moving forward.

The 69-year-old is presently serving a 23-year prison sentence handed down by a New York court in February 2020.

Weinstein, if convicted on all counts, could spend the rest of his life behind bars, as he is facing a combined maximum sentence of 140 years in prison for this trial alone.

The disgraced Hollywood filmmaker is slated to return to the LA court on Thursday, July 29, for a motions hearing.

"Anyone who abuses their power and influence to prey upon others will be brought to justice," asserted LA District Attorney George Gascón in a Wednesday statement.

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US Jobless Claims Up 14% Last Week Amid Continued Challenge From COVID-19 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose by 14 percent to 419,000 last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a continued challenge for the fragile labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending July 17, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 419,000, an increase of 51,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated 350,000 jobless claims filings for the week that ended on July 17.

"It certainly is disappointing to have the jobless claims move higher, and back above the 400,000 level," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive. "As a result, it puts a negative initial spin for that number."

Continuing claims for the week that ended on June 26 - reported with a one-week lag - was at 3.24 million versus the 3.27 million reading for the week to July 10.

The modest change in continuing claims left the weekly reading for unemployment unchanged at 2.4 percent.

More than a year into the coronavirus crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policy makers.

The Labor Department said there were only 850,000 job additions for June. But as a whole, the United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus measures. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, says he does not expect "full employment" - defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower - to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.9 percent in June.

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Top US, South Korean Officials Discuss Return to Nuclear Talks With N. Korea – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) – US Deputy of State Wendy Sherman met with Republic of Korea (ROK) President Moon-Jae-in and other senior officials in Seoul on Thursday to discuss the need to return to negotiations with Pyongyang over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Deputy Secretary Sherman and President Moon agreed on the importance of consultations to address Democratic People's Republic of Korea issues," Price said in a statement.

While in Seoul, Sherman also discussed the issue denuclearizing the peninsula with Foreign Minister Chung.

"The Deputy Secretary and the Foreign Minister also reaffirmed that diplomacy and dialogue are essential to achieving complete denuclearization of and establishing permanent peace on the Korean peninsula," Price said.

Likewise, during her meeting with Minister of Unification Lee In-young and Vice Minister of Unification Choi Young-joon, the three discussed "their shared commitment to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," Price said.

Sherman's meetings with top Korean officials also touched on cooperation on combatting COVID-19, trade, climate change, human rights and other issues, including the situation in Myanmar, Price said.

The dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang, as well as the inter-Korean dialogue, have been stalled since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, during which the United States demanded more decisive steps from North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, while Pyongyang accused the United States of not responding to prior commitments. Further denuclearization talks in Sweden in October 2019 failed to break the deadlock.

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US Appoints Ambassador Daniel Foote as Special Envoy for Haiti - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US administration has appointed career diplomat Daniel Foote as its special envoy for Haiti to work with Haitian and international partners toward the goal of holding free elections and achieving long-term stability in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"The Department of State is pleased to announce that Ambassador Daniel Foote, a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, will serve as its Special Envoy for Haiti. The Special Envoy will engage with Haitian and international partners to facilitate long-term peace and stability and support efforts to hold free and fair presidential and legislative elections," Price said in a statement.

Foote will also coordinate investigative and security assistance to Haiti in the wake of the assassination of President Jovenel Moise earlier this month, Price said.

He will work alongside US ambassador to Haiti Michele Sison to lead Washington's humanitarian efforts and diplomatic policies related to the country, Price added.

"Additionally, the Special Envoy will engage stakeholders in civil society and the private sector as we pursue Haitian-led solutions to the many pressing challenges facing Haiti," he said.

Prior to his current appointment, Foote served as Deputy Chief of Mission in Haiti and as the US Ambassador to Zambia, Price noted.

Moise was shot dead at his residence on July 7. His wife, Martine, was wounded and airlifted to a US hospital. The police said that they had identified 28 suspects, and 26 of them have since been detained. Most of the suspects are Colombian citizens. The Haitian authorities also arrested two American citizens and identified five companies they consider to be linked to the crime.

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US Jobless Claims Rise to 419,000 in Week to July 17 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose by 419,000 last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a continued challenge for the fragile labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending July 17, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 419,000, an increase of 51,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement.

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US Senate Democrats Must Act Quickly to Rescue DACA Immigration Program - Activists

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US Senate Democrats are in a position to save the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration program but must act quickly because applicants are in a dire situation in the wake of a devastating federal court decision, beneficiaries and activists told Sputnik.

In a ruling on July 16, US District Court Judge Andrew Hanen outlawed DACA, a program that temporarily protects immigrants brought to the United States before the age of 16, who are often referred to as "Dreamers," due to the previous DREAM Act. Meanwhile, Senate Democrats are pushing to include protections for DACA recipients in a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure reconciliation bill, including \$120 billion to create a pathway to citizenship.

"For new applicants, the situation is dire," The UndocuBlack Network (UBN) Co-Director Patrice Lawrence told Sputnik. "There will be no granting of new applications, no processing, no biometrics for new applicants... All this has been giving DACA people whiplash."

Lawrence, a Jamaican immigrant, said Congress could fix this with a "stroke of the pen," saying that there is still a good chance of including these changes in new legislation.

Center for American Progress Immigration Policy Managing Director Philip Wolgin warned that the ruling shuts some 80,000 applicants out of the DACA program, which only underscores the need for this legislation to get through.

However, Wolgin is optimistic the Democrats could pass something to rescue DACA given they only need a majority because they are using the reconciliation process to bypass the 60-vote threshold filibuster.

The 100-member Senate is evenly divided between parties, but the Democrats can get to 51 because Vice President Kamala Harris, who presides over the chamber, casts tie-breaking votes when necessary.

Wolgin said the current situation is much more preferable than trying to persuade ten Senate Republicans to back the measure, considering it is the party of Trump "who ran on an anti-immigrant and xenophobic platform."

"It's doable and should happen... We have a whole [Democratic] caucus and Senate who support reconciliation," Wolgin told Sputnik. "The stars are aligning,"

Immigrants themselves, however, are less optimistic and see the future shrouded by uncertainty. Ronnie James, a DACA recipient who will have to renew his work permit next year, said "it's unsure waters" with the program being cancelled. James said in he was working on Capitol Hill and saw the Dream and Promise Act fail to pass in the Senate in 2019.

"We've been policy-dependent on progressives and Democrats but we still see a lack of movement," James told Sputnik. "Similar language is being used in the Infrastructure bill. We've been in these political spaces."

Besides, when Democrats held the House and Senate previously they failed to get something through, James added. And similar programs were struck down by the US Supreme Court during the Obama administration.

"Neither side has been capable of producing a law that is of benefit to immigrants. They promise something and we're strung along. 2001 was the first Dream Act. It's been 20 years for me, longer for those in the '80s and '90s," James said.

Erika, an immigrant from El Salvador, is another DACA recipient at risk. She said the DACA program allowed her to get vocational training and become a medical assistant. However, she got laid off on July 13 because her permit expired.

"It's been more than 120 days since I submitted my application and I continue to wait for the approval," she told Sputnik.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said Republicans are not likely to back any DACA legislation without addressing the surge in illegal immigrants at the border.

DACA was launched by the Obama administration in 2012. It permits children of illegal immigrants, who were brought to the United States under the age of 16, to remain in the country, provided they had arrived by 2007. The program does not currently provide permanent lawful status to its recipients but has protected some 700,000 young people from deportation. Former President Donald Trump tried to end the program but the US Supreme Court blocked his administration's effort. After taking office in January, President Joe Biden promised to preserve the program.

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RPT: REVIEW - US, Germany Commit to Ukraine Security, Energy Independence

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and Germany issued a joint statement in which they affirmed their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and energy independence from Russia having announced earlier they had reached a deal on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

"The United States and Germany are steadfast in their support for Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and chosen European path. We recommit ourselves today to push back against Russian aggression and malign activities in Ukraine and beyond... We support the energy security of Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe," the statement said on Wednesday.

The two countries expressed their determination to hold Russia accountable for its alleged "aggression and malign activities" by imposing costs such as implementing sanctions should Moscow attempt to use energy as a geopolitical weapon against Ukraine.

The United States and Germany also said they will use the US-EU High Level Dialogue on Russia - established in June - as well as bilateral channels to prepare the appropriate tools and mechanisms needed to respond jointly to Russia should it engage in aggression and malign activities.

In addition, Germany vowed to take action at the national and European Union levels in case Russia uses energy as a weapon or takes aggressive actions against Ukraine.

GAS TRANSIT NEGOTIATIONS

The United States and Germany also committed to helping Ukraine negotiate an extension of its gas transit fee agreement with Russia. Germany announced it will appoint a special envoy to help negotiate an extension of the agreement for at least ten years starting no later than September 1. The existing agreement is set to expire in 2024.

Earlier on Wednesday, a senior US State Department official said the United States and Germany will do everything they can to support Ukraine in its negotiations. The official noted that Germany has particular leverage at a time prior to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline becoming operational.

"Our goal is to prevent Ukraine from losing any transit revenues for as long as possible. Right now, they have an agreement until 2024, and the extension will take them beyond that," the official said.

However, numerous US lawmakers has expressed doubts about the commitment to assist Ukraine. Senator Ted Cruz questioned Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland in a congressional hearing on Wednesday morning about whether any officials had threatened Ukraine to go along with the US-Germany agreement. Both Nuland and a senior State Department official denied knowledge of any officials engaging in such behavior.

US AND GERMAN SUPPORT FOR GREEN ENERGY IN UKRAINE

Washington and Berlin also announced the launching of the US-Germany Climate and Energy Partnership in the statement seeking to foster collaboration on green energy initiatives. One of the pillars of the partnership will be a focus on energy transitions away from Russia in Eastern and Central Europe.

"As part of the US-Germany Climate and Energy Partnership, we have decided to establish a pillar to support the energy transitions in emerging economies. This pillar will include a focus on supporting Ukraine and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These efforts will not only contribute to the fight against climate change but will support European energy security by reducing demand for Russian energy," the joint statement said.

Part of the efforts include establishing a Germany-administered Green Fund for Ukraine and Berlin donating an initial \$175 million.

Germany and the United States said they hope to promote and support investments of at least \$1 billion to develop hydrogen energy, accelerate the transition away from coal and foster carbon neutrality in Ukraine.

Germany also vowed to provide a 60 million euro package to support Ukraine's energy security through electrical grid integration and modernization.

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Biden Says His Policies if Passed Will Reduce Inflation

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said during a CNN town hall event that his economic policies if passed by Congress will reduce inflation.

"If we pass the other two things I'm trying to get done, we will in fact reduce inflation," Biden said on Wednesday.

Biden added that the US economy is "picking up significantly."

The Biden administration crafted a \$4.5 trillion Build Back Better plan that it claims would fund decades of economic growth, create new jobs and keep prices low.

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Biden Says He First Felt Like World Leader When Sitting Across From Putin

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he first felt like the leader of the free world when he sat across from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"You always hear 'leader of the free world.' Well, I realized when I'm sitting across from Putin, who I know, he knows who I am. I know who he is. He knows I mean what I say and can do what I say," Biden said during a CNN townhall event on Wednesday. "It's the first time I've ever felt the notion that I am in the office that is the leader of the free world."

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Biden Says US Boosted Number of Federal Agents on Borders to Intercept Drug Trade

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said his administration increased the number of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents on the US borders to intercept drug trafficking efforts.

"We've also increased the number of DEA agents [for] what we're doing at the border and how we're going to deal the intercepting that drug trade," Biden said at a CNN Townhall on Wednesday.

Biden added that the Justice Department has also increased the number of people working on drug trafficking cases.

The US president also said he has confronted China on doing more to crack down on exports of fentanyl, which is being mixed into other drugs like opioids and heroine.

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Biden Says Chinese President Xi 'Truly Believes' in Future Determined by Oligarchs

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping truly believes in a future determined by oligarchs and not democracies.

"I talked to Xi, Xi Jinping in China, who I know well, we don't agree on a lot of things, he's a bright and really tough guy. He truly believes that the 21st century will be determined by oligarchs, not a joke," Biden said at a CNN Townhall on Wednesday. "Democracies cannot function in the 21st century, the argument is, because things are moving so rapidly that you can't pull together a nation that is divided to get a consensus on acting quickly."

Biden added that leaders such as Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin are betting on autocracies, and that democracy must demonstrate that they can "stand up" and get something done.

The statement comes following news earlier on Wednesday that Biden intends to look for opportunities to engage with Xi, although no formal decisions have been made.

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Biden Says Not Giving Up on 'Dreamers' Program After Judge Blocks New Applications

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a CNN town hall said he is not giving up on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which shields some young undocumented immigrants from deportation, after a judge issued an order temporarily blocking the government from accepting new applications from the so-called Dreamers.

Last week, a US federal judge ordered the Department of Homeland Security to stop approving new applications for the DACA program.

"I'm not letting this go... they [Dreamers] should be able to stay in the United States of America," Biden said on Wednesday.

Judge Andrew Hanen said the DACA program violates federal law because a US president does not have legislative power to declare that a certain category of undocumented migrants is in the United States lawfully.

DACA was launched by the Obama administration in 2012. It permits children of illegal immigrants, who were brought to the United States under the age of 16, to remain in the country, provided they had arrived by 2007. The program does not currently provide permanent lawful status to its recipients but has protected some 700,000 young people from deportation. Former President Donald Trump tried to end the program but the US Supreme Court blocked his administration's effort. After taking office in January, President Joe Biden promised to preserve the program.

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RPT - Biden on Capitol Riot: 'You Can't Look at TV and Say Nothing Happened on January 6'

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - It is impossible to look at a television and believe that nothing happened at the US Capitol on January 6, President Joe Biden said during a townhall with CNN.

"I don't care if you think I'm Satan reincarnated, the fact is you can't look at that television and say 'nothing happened on the sixth,'" Biden said on Wednesday. "You can't listen to people who say this was a peaceful march," Biden said in response to a question about a congressional investigation into the incident.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi received criticism from her Republican colleagues earlier Wednesday for rejecting their picks for the select committee being formed to investigate the January 6 incident at the Capitol. Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy called the move an "abuse of power" that damages the institution.

A federal judge sentenced the first person convicted of crimes pertaining to the incident on Monday. Paul Hodgkins was sentenced to eight months in prison while 165 others face charges related to the Capitol breach.

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Biden Says Expects Children Under 12 to Be Eligible for Vaccine Within 1-2 Months

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he expects children in the United States under the age of 12 may be eligible for a coronavirus vaccine sometime between the end of August and October.

"They're [Food and Drug Administration] not promising me any specific date, but my expectation talking to the group of scientists... is that sometime maybe the beginning of school: at the end of August, begin of September, October," Biden said at a CNN Townhall on Wednesday when asked when children in the United States under the age of 12 will be able to be vaccinated for COVID-19.

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Russia Considers Accusations of Using Energy as Weapon to Be Unfair Competition - Antonov

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Russia considers any accusations that it uses energy resources to exert political pressure to be unfair competition, Russian Ambassador to United States said in a statement.

"Through many years of honest interaction with Europe and other consumers of domestic hydrocarbons, our country has proved that it is a reliable partner. We have never imposed our supplies on anyone, did not use energy resources as an instrument of political pressure and did not try to solve any narrowly opportunistic goals attributed to us," Antonov said on Wednesday. Antonov said Russia rejects any such accusations, noting that Moscow "sees in such attempts nothing more than unfair competition."

"We repeat tirelessly: the construction of Nord Stream 2 and any other Russian export pipelines is the subject of commercial agreements with those states that are interested in our gas. Russia is ready to supply exactly as much hydrocarbons as consumers need," Antonov added.

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US-Germany Nord Stream 2 Deal Contradicts Putin-Biden Agreement - Russian Ambassador

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The joint statement issued by the United States and Germany on their positions toward Russia and Ukraine with respect to energy and security policy raises serious questions and runs contrary to the spirit of the talks between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin last month, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said.

"The document raises serious questions and even a lack of understanding about political attacks against Russia. The hostile tone towards our country is completely contrary to the spirit of the two presidents' talks on June 16 in Geneva," Antonov said in a statement on Wednesday.

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Attempts to Paint Russia as Aggressor 'Baseless, Useless' - Russian Ambassador

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Attempts to portray Russia as an aggressive and malign actor are "baseless and useless" threats, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said.

"Attempts to present us as an aggressor and a country conducting 'malign' activities have long been the hallmark of Russophobes. The threats against us are groundless and useless. We neither accept such rhetoric, nor can we accept the practice of illegitimate unilateral sanctions. Only the UN Security Council is mandated to do that," Antonov said in a statement on Wednesday.

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Tesla Head Elon Musk Says Electric Carmaker Will Likely Accept Bitcoin Again

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Tesla will likely begin accepting again Bitcoin as a payment method for the electric cars it sells, Chief Executive Elon Musk said but added that he was awaiting due diligence on the amount of renewable energy that is needed to mine the cryptocurrency.

"I wanted a little bit more due diligence to confirm that the percentage of renewable energy usage is most likely at or above 50 percent, and that there is a trend towards increasing that number, and if so Tesla would resume accepting bitcoin. Most likely the answer is that Tesla would resume accepting bitcoin," Musk said at the 'B Word' conference on Wednesday.

Musk's remarks that he was open to re-accepting Bitcoin reverses Tesla's announcement in May that the cryptocurrency cannot be used to purchase its products.

The electric carmaker's decision then was seen as appeasing some of its more environmentally-conscious investors who had been critical about how Bitcoin was mined using huge amounts of electricity generated from oil fossil fuels. Musk's comment about Bitcoin utilizing more renewable energies also appeared to be a nod in this direction, as an increasing number of cryptocurrency miners start diversifying toward green energy.

"Tesla's mission is accelerating the advent of sustainable energy," Musk said. "We can't be the company that does that and also not do appropriate diligence on the energy usage of Bitcoin." Musk, who can move the price of Bitcoin by thousands of dollars a time when he comments on it, confirmed at the conference that the cryptocurrency "is one of the things of any significance I own" outside of Tesla and his space exploration company Space X.

"I might pump, but I don't dump," Musk said. "I definitely do not believe in getting the price high and selling ... I would like to see Bitcoin succeed."

The price of Bitcoin finished up 7 percent on Wednesday after Musk's comments, recouping almost all of its losses over the previous two sessions. Trending at almost \$65,000 in April, the cryptocurrency now trades at less than half of that, at under \$32,000.

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Two Doses of Pfizer Vaccine 88% Effective Against Delta Variant, AstraZeneca 67% - Study

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Two doses of the Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccines are effective against the new delta COVID variant but not as effective as they are against the original, a study published in the US New England Journal of Medicine revealed.

Two doses of the Pfizer vaccine was 88 percent effective against the delta virus versus 93.7% against the alpha strain, according to the study released on Wednesday, while AstraZeneca's was 67% effective against the delta versus 74.5% against the original.

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US House Approves Bipartisan Legislation Regulating PFAS Contaminants in Drinking Water

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Legislation instructing the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set limits on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in drinking water sailed through the House of Representatives on a bipartisan 241-183 vote.

"PFAS 'forever chemicals' are being found in everything from our drinking water to our household supplies, posing an urgent and growing public health threat. Thankfully, with the passage of the PFAS Action Act today, we are now one step closer to cleaning up contamination and protecting Americans from these toxic chemicals," US House Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone said on Wednesday following the vote.

The legislation would direct EPA to begin drafting rules limited PFAS in drinking water while also giving the EPA authority to draft regulations for an entire class that includes thousands of PFAS-related chemicals found in a multitude of consumer products ranging from nonstick cookware to waterproof clothing.

"Most people in the US have some level of PFAS - forever chemicals - flowing through their blood. We've known this for decades & need to act now to keep PFAS out of our environment & protect public health," Congresswoman Debbie Dingell said.

Dingell, a Democrat, and Congressman Fred Upton, a Republican, introduced the legislation, a version of which passed the House of Representatives last year but died in the Senate.

Studies have linked PFAS contamination to health problems including high cholesterol, thyroid disease, and testicular and kidney cancer.

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White House Announces Nominees for US Ambassadors to Austria, Canada, Slovenia - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Thursday tapped four individuals to fill vacant diplomatic positions, including nominees for US ambassadors in Austria, Canada and Slovenia.

David Cohen, CEO of Comcast Corporation, has been nominated to serve as US Ambassador to Canada, a position filled on an interim basis since 2019, when Kelly Craft was reassigned to head up the US delegation in the United Nations.

Aldona Wos, the former US Ambassador to Estonia, was selected in February 2020 by former President Donald Trump to lead the embassy in Ottawa, however, her nomination was returned by the Senate following the election of incumbent US President Joe Biden.

Victoria Kennedy, a litigator based in Boston and Washington, DC, if confirmed, will lead the US Embassy in Vienna, replacing Trevor Traina, while Jamie Harpootlian has been nominated for Ambassador to Slovenia.

The White House also selected John Bass, a former ambassador to Afghanistan, Georgia and Turkey, to serve as the Under Secretary of State for management.

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US Accepts Applications by Citizens of 5 Nations for Protected Status - Immigration Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Citizens from Myanmar, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen can now apply for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in the United States, provided they are applying for the first time, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) said.

"USCIS is starting with these countries because they are either new designations or recently announced re-designations. When filing an initial TPS application, applicants can also request an Employment Authorization Document," the agency said in a press release on Wednesday. TPS allows citizens of nations impacted by natural disasters, war, political turmoil and other calamities to live and work in the United States until it is safe to return to their former homes.

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REVIEW - US, Germany Commit to Ukraine Security, Energy Independence

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mechanisms needed to respond jointly to Russia should it engage in aggression and malign activities.

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"Our goal is to prevent Ukraine from losing any transit revenues for as long as possible. Right now, they have an agreement until 2024, and the extension will take them beyond that," the official said.

However, numerous US lawmakers has expressed doubts about the commitment to assist Ukraine. Senator Ted Cruz questioned Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland in a congressional hearing on Wednesday morning about whether any officials had threatened Ukraine to go along with the US-Germany agreement. Both Nuland and a senior State Department official denied knowledge of any officials engaging in such behavior.

US AND GERMAN SUPPORT FOR GREEN ENERGY IN UKRAINE

Washington and Berlin also announced the launching of the US-Germany Climate and Energy Partnership in the statement seeking to foster collaboration on green energy initiatives. One of the pillars of the partnership will be a focus on energy transitions away from Russia in Eastern and Central Europe.

"As part of the US-Germany Climate and Energy Partnership, we have decided to establish a pillar to support the energy transitions in emerging economies. This pillar will include a focus on supporting Ukraine and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These efforts will not only contribute to the fight against climate change but will support European energy security by reducing demand for Russian energy," the joint statement said.

Part of the efforts include establishing a Germany-administered Green Fund for Ukraine and Berlin donating an initial \$175 million.

Germany and the United States said they hope to promote and support investments of at least \$1 billion to develop hydrogen energy, accelerate the transition away from coal and foster carbon neutrality in Ukraine.

Germany also vowed to provide a 60 million euro package to support Ukraine's energy security through electrical grid integration and modernization.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik)

NORD STREAM 2

- * The Biden administration decided not to obstruct construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline because it realized sanctions would not work and wanted to avoid alienating Germany, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.
- * German companies operating in Russia are relieved and optimistic over Washington's decision to refrain from imposing extraterritorial sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 gas project, the Russian-German Chamber of Foreign Trade said.
- * Germany has committed under the Nord Stream 2 deal with the United States that it will provide a 60 million euro package to support Ukraine's energy security, a senior State Department official told reporters.
- * Germany has committed to appoint a special envoy and use all its leverage before the Nord Stream 2 pipeline becomes operational in order to help Ukraine better negotiate gas transit with Russia, the senior official said.
- * Ukraine has officially initiated consultations with the European Commission and Germany on Nord Stream 2, believing that the project violates the principles of diversification of the EU Energy Union, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said.
- * US diplomat Derek Chollet met with Ukrainian officials in Kiev to discuss Washington's concerns and commitments regarding the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline amid reports of an imminent deal on the project between the United States and Germany, the State Department said.

AFGHANISTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- * About half of the district centers in Afghanistan are under the control of the Taliban movement (banned in Russia), Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday.
- * The United States has delivered three refurbished military helicopters to Afghanistan and such assistance will continue in the future, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.
- * The Taliban (designated terrorist and outlawed in Russia) consider last weeks' negotiations with the Afghan government in Doha a "positive" development, hoping to resolve the disagreements through dialogue, Mohammad Naeem, the spokesman for the radical movement's political office, told Sputnik.

RUSSIA'S SPACE MODULE LAUNCH

- * The Russian Nauka ("Science") module was launched to the International Space Station (ISS) from the Baikonur cosmodrome via a Proton-M carrier rocket on Wednesday, a Sputnik correspondent reported.
- * The module reached orbit, an announcer at the cosmodrome's observation deck said.

PUTIN-MERKEL TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are satisfied with the approaching completion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the Kremlin said on Wednesday.

* Merkel discussed with Putin the implementation of the Minsk agreements, and energy issues, including gas transit via Ukraine and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the German government said.

ZELENSKYY VISIT TO WASHINGTON

* US President Joe Biden will meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington on August 30, the White House said on Wednesday.

* Zelensky said that he expected a fruitful meeting with Biden on August 30, where he plans to discuss Crimea, Donbas, energy and reform issues.

* The upcoming visit of Zelenskyy to Washington in August is not related to the joint statement issued by the US and Germany about the Nord Stream 2 deal, a Senior State Department official said.

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US Stocks Up 2nd Day in Row, Extending Rebound From Previous Meltdown

NEW YORK, July 21 (Sputnik) - US stocks rebounded broadly for a second day in a row on Wednesday as investors continued to buy in a market cheapened by a plunge earlier in the week on fears about a resurgence in coronavirus cases.

"We are seeing real resilience after a troubling start to the week," Craig Erlam, analyst at broker OANDA, said. "The Delta variant remains an ever-present downside risk for the markets in the near-term but as long as inflation remains only a temporary problem, it also keeps central bank hawks at bay. And we know how investors love that."

In Wednesday's trade, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, closed up 0.8 percent at 34,798. In the previous session, the Dow gained 1.5 percent, rebounding from Monday's 2.1 percent slump, which was the index's sharpest loss since January 29.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, also rose 0.8 percent to settle at 4,359. The index gained similarly on Tuesday after losing just as much on Monday.

The Nasdaq Composite, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, finished 0.9 percent at 14,632. Nasdaq gained 1.6 percent in the previous session after losing just 0.9 percent on Monday.

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US Optimistic on Getting 'Security Package' on Kabul Airport - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is optimistic that it will get the needed "security package" regarding the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, a senior US State Department official said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

"On the airport, obviously, we've said the airport needs to be open and functioning," the official said. "We are grateful for our conversations with our colleagues in Turkey. DOD [Defense Department] is leading those conversations. We are optimistic that we will have the security package that we need at the airport in Kabul."

Earlier on Wednesday, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland told Congress that Turkey's intention to keep troops at the Kabul airport is necessary for the United States and its allies to maintain diplomatic presence in Afghanistan after the US troops pullout. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Monday that Ankara intends to hold negotiations with the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) about its possible military presence in Afghanistan. Erdogan expressed belief that the Taliban is behaving not in the way some Muslims behave toward others and urged the movement to abandon the occupation policy in relation to their own brothers.

However, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said no final decision was made yet on Ankara's possible assistance to secure the Kabul airport.

The Taliban has said that it opposes the deployment of Turkish troops and sees such a development as a violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the Afghan military spokesperson Gen. Ajmal Shinwari said the country's armed forces will be in charge of ensuring airport security.

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US Distributes 2.2Mln Additional COVID-19 Economic Impact Payments Worth \$4Bln - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US government has disbursed an additional 2.2 million Economic Impact Payments during the past six weeks, mainly to individuals and families for which data to process the payments was lacking, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday. "In total, this includes about 2.2 million payments with a value of more than \$4 billion," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

Of these, about 1.3 million payments, with a value of approximately \$2.6 billion, went to eligible individuals for whom the Internal Revenue Service previously did not have information to issue payments but who recently filed a tax return, the release said.

The total also includes supplemental payments to about 900,000 people who earlier this year received payments based on their 2019 tax returns but are eligible for a new or larger payment based on their recently processed 2020 tax returns, the release added.

The latest disbursement brings the total so far to more than 171 million payments with a total value of more than \$400 billion since the payments began rolling out to Americans in batches on March 12, according to the release.

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Women-Hating 'Incel' Plotted Massacre of Girl Students in Ohio - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury has approved charges against a self-proclaimed hater of women in the so-called involuntary celibate, or incel, community of plotting to massacre female students at a university in Ohio, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"A federal grand jury has charged a self-identified 'incel' with attempting to conduct a mass shooting of women and with illegally possessing a machine gun," the Justice Department announced in a press release.

Tres Genco, 21, of Hillsboro, Ohio, faces charges of allegedly plotting to commit a hate crime by shooting female students in sororities at a university in Ohio. He was arrested by federal agents earlier on Wednesday, the release said.

"Genco also allegedly wrote a manifesto, stating he would 'slaughter' women 'out of hatred, jealousy and revenge.' ... [L]ow enforcement agents discovered a note of Genco's that indicated he hoped to 'aim big' for a kill count of 3,000 people and intended to attend military training," the release added.

The incel movement is an online community of predominantly men who harbor anger towards women and who seek to commit violence in support of their belief that women unjustly deny them sexual or romantic attention, according to the release.

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Almost Two-Thirds of US Voters Want Congress to Probe Black Lives Matter Riots - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Some 66 percent of US voters believe Congress should investigate the nationwide Black Lives Matter riots in 2020, as well as the riot that breached the Capitol Building in Washington, DC on January 6, a Rasmussen and National Police Association (NPA) poll said on Wednesday.

"A new national telephone and online survey by the National Police Association and Rasmussen Reports finds that 66 percent of likely US voters think Congress should investigate last year's violent protests, in which more than 2,000 police officers suffered injuries in the line of duty," the poll said.

Only 21 percent of those polled did not think Congress should investigate the BLM protests, and 13 percent were not sure, Rasmussen said. The survey also found strong voter support for law enforcement on a range of issues including from the Hispanic and African-American communities, it also said.

"The number of voters who want Congress to investigate last year's violent protests is higher than the 49 percent who say they support House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's select committee investigation of the January 6 Capitol riot," Rasmussen said.

According to a study of 68 major US cities made by the Major Cities Chiefs Association, in the summer of 2020, there were at least 574 protests that involved acts of violence, including assaults on police officers, looting and arson, it added.

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US Congressman Urges Biden to Punish China for Recent Microsoft Hack - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden needs to sanction China over the nation's recent cyber strike against Microsoft to dissuade Beijing from a policy of hacking the United States and its allies, ranking Republican on the US House Armed Services Committee Mike Rogers said on Wednesday.

"I implore you to impose significant sanctions using the authorities in Executive Order 13694, criminal charges, or other punitive measures against the People's Republic of China and the state affiliated actors responsible for the cyberattack on the Microsoft email exchange," Rogers wrote in a letter to the president.

The 2015 order calls for economic sanctions against individuals and nations responsible for malicious cyber activities against the United States.

By failing to punish China for the Microsoft hack and other cyber intrusions with penalties comparable to sanctions imposed on Russia over last year's Solar Winds intrusion, Rogers said the US risks creating an "unacceptable double standard in this era of great power competition." The Biden administration and Western allies formally blamed China on Monday for a massive hack of Microsoft Exchange email server software and asserted that criminal hackers associated with the Chinese government have carried out ransomware and other illicit cyber operations.

Rogers said he welcomed the public condemnation of China while noting that the announcement was not accompanied by sanctions. In April, Biden imposed a range of retaliatory measures against Russia for alleged election interference and malicious cyberactivity, including last year's Solar Winds attack. Russia has repeatedly denied the allegations.

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NASA Says Perseverance Rover to Begin Collecting Samples From Martian Surface

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Perseverance Rover will begin collecting specimens from an ancient Martian lake bed, analyzing the specimens with a series of instruments and then storing the samples for an eventual flight to Earth, NASA said on Wednesday.

"This important mission milestone is expected to begin within the next two weeks," NASA said in a press release. "Perseverance will require about 11 days to complete its first sampling."

The six-wheel rover that landed on Mars in February is now positioned at a site believed to contain the deepest and most ancient layers of exposed bedrock in a dry lakebed known as the Jezero Crater. The rover will collect two samples, including a specimen for what NASA called "proximity science."

"On the geologic double, first we use an abrading bit to scrape off the top layers of rock and dust to expose fresh, unweathered surfaces, blow it clean with our Gas Dust Removal Tool, and then get up close and personal with our turret-mounted proximity science instruments," NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory scientist Vivian Sun said in the release.

Instruments including a laser spectrograph on the rover's mast will then perform mineral and chemical examinations before drilling into the specimen for further analysis.

The samples will then be sealed and stored for subsequent NASA missions, now in development in with the European Space Agency, that would send spacecraft to Mars to collect the sealed samples and return them to Earth for in-depth analysis.

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US Government Will Run out of Money By Oct-Nov if Debt Ceiling Not Raised - CBO

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US government will most likely run out of money between October and November unless the Treasury's debt ceiling is raised, the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) warned on Wednesday as Republican lawmakers opposed to President Joe Biden were reported to be opposing a hike.

"The Treasury's cash balance and those extraordinary measures would enable it to continue financing the government's activities for a while," the CBO said in a report that examined the federal debt and statutory limit. "However, if the debt limit remained unchanged, the ability to borrow using those measures would ultimately be exhausted, and the Treasury would probably run out of cash sometime in the first quarter of the next fiscal year (which begins on October 1, 2021), most likely in October or November."

The CBO said the timing and size of revenue collections and outlays over the coming months could differ noticeably from its projections. But it was clear about one thing though: the government would be unable to pay its obligations fully, and it would delay making payments for its activities, default on its debt obligations, or both.

The caution came as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who leads the Republican lawmakers opposed to Democrat President Biden, told the Punchbowl News portal that his party will not vote for a debt ceiling hike.

"I can't imagine there will be a single Republican voting to raise the debt ceiling after what we've been experiencing," said McConnell who added that trillions in new debt accumulated by the Biden administration since it came to office in January has not resolved US economic woes.

Democrat Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, meanwhile, described McConnell's remarks as "shameless, cynical and totally political," adding that much of the current debt ceiling was accrued from the Trump administration's borrowings during the height of the coronavirus crisis. "This debt is Trump debt," Schumer was quoted as saying by CNN. "It's Covid debt. Democrats joined three times during the Trump administration to do the responsible thing and the bottom line is that Leader McConnell should not be playing political games with the full faith and credit of the United States. Americans pay their debts."

The CBO said as of June 30, the amount of outstanding debt subject to the statutory limit was \$28.5 trillion, after an addition of \$6.5 trillion borrowed by the Biden administration.

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US to Do Everything Possible to Support Talks on Ukraine Transit Agreement - Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will do everything it can to support the negotiations on the transit agreement through Ukraine amid the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a senior US State Department official said in a press briefing on Wednesday. "In terms of the transit agreement, I don't think we can prejudge the results of those negotiations. We'll do everything we can to support those negotiations," the official said.

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US Senate Confirms Bonnie Jenkins to Be Top US Arms Control Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday confirmed Bonnie Jenkins to be the next Under Secretary of State for Arms Control.

The Senate voted 52-48 to in favor of Jenkins' nomination, with two Republicans, Senator Susan Collins and Senator Rand Paul, joining majority Democrats to support her candidacy. Jenkins said during a confirmation hearing in April that she would aim to limit Russian and Chinese nuclear expansion if confirmed to the post. She also said the Biden administration plans to pursue deeper cuts to nuclear arsenals with Russia, but that would depend on the status of bilateral strategic stability talks.

Jenkins had also stressed that the Biden administration certainly wants to include discussions on some of the new weapons that Russia has developed and other non-strategic weapons.

On China, Jenkins said the Biden administration thinks it is best to pursue a nuclear arms deal with Beijing, through bilateral talks because of certain security issues the United States would want to look at specifically with China.

In February, Russia and the United States agreed to extend the New START treaty for five more years without any renegotiation of its terms. The treaty is now set to expire on February 5, 2026. It is currently the only arms control agreement between two countries that is still in force.

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US House Minority Leader Accuses Pelosi of Abusing Power in Capitol Riot Probe

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has abused her power by rejecting Republicans from participating in the Capitol riot probe, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said on Wednesday.

"Speaker Nancy Pelosi has taken the unprecedented step of denying the minority party's picks for the Select Committee on January 6," McCarthy said in a statement. "This represents an egregious abuse of power and will irreparably damage this institution."

No Republican would now agree to serve on Pelosi's proposed committee at all and instead the House Minority would carry out its own investigation into the events of January 6, McCarthy stated.

"Unless Speaker Pelosi reverses course and seats all five Republican nominees, Republicans will not be party to their sham process and will instead pursue our own investigation of the facts," he said

The Speaker's action "has made it undeniable" that her proposed panel had lost all legitimacy and credibility and it showed that the Speaker was more interested in playing politics than seeking the truth, McCarthy said.

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Zelenskyy Visit to Washington Unrelated to Nord Stream 2 Deal Announcement - US Official
WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The upcoming visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Washington in August that was announced today is not related to the joint statement issued by the US and Germany about the Nord Stream 2 deal, a Senior State Department official said on Wednesday.

"That invitation was issued in early June, and so we have been working with the Ukrainians to identify a date for some time, so that announcement is not related to the issuance of this joint statement," the official said.

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US Aims to Prevent Ukraine From Losing Any Transit Revenues from Nord Stream 2 - Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States aims to prevent Ukraine from losing any transit revenues from the completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a senior US State Department official told reporters on Wednesday.

"Our goal is to prevent Ukraine from losing any transit revenues for as long as possible. Right now, they have an agreement unto 2024, and the extension will take them beyond that," the official said.

"We continue to oppose the pipeline as a bad deal for Ukraine and for Europe... We think that there is more than the previous administration could have done, but... we are making the best of a bad hand and in doing so we're trying to make sure that we protect our partner, Ukraine," the official added.

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US-German Nord Stream 2 Deal Statement Sends 'Clear Message' to Moscow - Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The joint statement by the United States and Germany on the Nord Stream 2 deal sends a clear message that they will stand for Russia using energy as a geopolitical weapon, a senior State Department official told reporters on Wednesday.

"Our joint statement sends clear message that the United States and Germany will not tolerate Russia using energy as a geopolitical weapon in Europe while escalating its aggression against Ukraine," the official said.

Russian officials have repeatedly said the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is purely a commercial endeavor, not a political one. On Tuesday, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov, commenting on the Nord Stream 2 situation, said the United States is using Ukraine as a tool to try and change Moscow's policies.

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Germany to Help Ukraine Negotiate Gas Transit Deal Extension Post-Merkel - US Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The current German government under Chancellor Angela Merkel is committing itself and future governments to helping Ukraine negotiate an extension of its gas transit agreement beyond its current 2024 deadline, a Senior State Department official said on Wednesday.

"Germany is committing, in writing, to use all of its available leverage to negotiate [a gas transit] agreement... we really look forward to engaging with a future German government intensively on the implementation of these commitments," the official said.

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US Consulted Closely With Ukraine, Poland on Nord Stream 2 Deal - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has consulted closely with Ukraine, Poland and other nations while working on the Nord Stream 2 deal with Germany, a senior State Department official told reporters on Wednesday.

"Throughout this process, both we and our German partners have consulted closely with Ukraine and Poland as well as other countries that would be harmed by that project about their concerns which we have taken into account," the official said.

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US House Speaker Pelosi Rejects Republican Candidates for Capitol Riot Probe Panel

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday rejected two Republican candidates from serving on the Capitol riot investigation committee.

"Monday evening, the Minority Leader [Kevin McCarthy] recommended five members to serve on the Select Committee," Pelosi said in a statement. "I must reject the recommendations of Representatives [Jim] Banks and [Jim] Jordan to the Select Committee.

Pelosi said she told McCarthy on Wednesday morning about objections raised about Banks and Jordan serving on the committee and the impact their appointments may have had on the integrity of the investigation.

Pelosi said there was now "no hope" for reaching agreement with the Republicans on setting up any bipartisan, independent National Commission because of insufficient support from Republican senators.

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US, Germany Agree to \$1Bln Green Fund to Support Ukraine Energy Security - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and Germany have agreed to establish a \$1 billion green fund for Ukraine to promote renewable energy along with energy efficiency and security amid the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, a senior State Department official said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"As part of our US-Germany climate and energy partnership, Germany has committed to create and administer \$1 billion green fund for Ukraine to support Ukraine's energy transition, energy efficiency and energy security," the official said. "The goals for the fund will be to promote the

use of renewable energy, facilitate the development of hydrogen, increase energy efficiency, accelerate the transition from coal and foster carbon neutrality."

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Germany to Appoint Envoy to Help Ukraine Negotiate Gas Transit With Russia - US Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Germany has committed to appoint a special envoy and use all its leverage before the Nord Stream 2 pipeline becomes operational in order to help Ukraine better negotiate gas transit with Russia, a senior State Department official said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Germany has committed to appoint a special envoy and use all of its available leverage in the period before Nord Stream 2 becomes operational to help Ukraine negotiate on extension of its gas transit contract with Russia well beyond 2024," the official said.

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Germany Committed to 60Mln Euro Package to Support Ukraine Energy Security - US Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Germany has vowed under the deal with the United States on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project that it will provide a 60 million euro package to support Ukraine's energy security, a senior State Department official told reporters on Wednesday.

"Germany has also committed to a 60 million euro Ukraine resilience package to support Ukraine's energy and security," the official said, noting that it concerns facilitating electrical grid integration, as well as supporting modernization of and reforms to Ukraine's energy sector.

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US to Use Sanctions if Russia Engages in Malign Activity - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The United States will use sanctions against Russia if Moscow engages in malign activity concerning the Nord Stream 2 project, a senior administration official told reporters on Friday.

"The United States and Germany will not tolerate Russia using energy as a geopolitical weapon in Europe," the official said. "We are committed to working together with our allies and partners to impose significant costs on Russia including in the areas of sanctions and energy flows if it engages these malign activities."

Russian officials have repeatedly said the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is purely a commercial endeavor, not a political one. On Tuesday, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said the United States is using Ukraine as a tool to try and change Moscow's policies.

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Saudi Aramco Says Data Leak 'Has No Impact' on Operations

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - A recent data leak by a third party contractor has had no impact on the operations of the state-owned Saudi Arabian oil company Aramco, the company said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Aramco recently became aware of the indirect release of a limited amount of company data which was held by third party contractors," the release said. "We confirm that the release of data was not due to a breach of our systems, has no impact on our operations, and the company continues to maintain a robust cybersecurity posture."

Data from the leak appeared on the dark web earlier in the week with a countdown timer and claims that 1 terabyte - or 1,000 gigabytes - worth of Aramco's data would be sold off to buyers on the internet. 1 gigabyte samples of the data are currently being sold for \$2,000 a piece.

The leakers, a group known as ZeroX, claim to have data including information about 14,254 employees, their names, photos, passports, emails, and phone numbers and other personal info. They also purportedly have project specifications for machinery, environmental, and architectural systems, as well as a list of Aramco's clients, their invoices and contracts.

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US Provides 3 Refurbished Military Helicopters to Afghanistan - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has delivered three refurbished military helicopters to Afghanistan and such assistance will continue in the future, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We have begun provision of the aircraft that mentioned to you earlier that we are going to provide. On Friday, three newly refurbished UH-60s landed in Kabul and they will continue to see a steady drum beat of that kind of support going forward," Austin said.

Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said earlier that the United States will beef up the Afghanistan Air Force with 37 Black Hawk helicopters and help refurbish a large part of its fleet of Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters.

The United States will also provide the Afghan armed forces three more Super Tucano strike airplanes thereby increasing their military edge over the Taliban forces, Kirby added.

Afghanistan is seeing increased violence as foreign troops are gradually withdrawing from the country. The pullout, scheduled to be completed by September, was one of the points of agreement that the Taliban and the United States reached in Doha last year.

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Top US General Says About Half of Afghanistan District Centers Under Taliban Control

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - About half of the district centers in Afghanistan are under the control of the Taliban movement (banned in Russia), Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday.

"As of today, more or less, I guess it's about 212, 214, it's in that range, the district centers are in Taliban control, it's about half of the 419 that are out there," Milley told reporters.

Milley said it appears the momentum is on the side of the Taliban since they have seized a significant amount of territory over the last six months, however, they have not taken over any of the 34 provincial capitals.

The general said the Taliban are trying to isolate the major population centers and are currently putting pressure on the outskirts of 17 of the 34 provincial capitals. Afghan security forces are giving up district centers in order to consolidate forces to protect the provincial capitals, he added.

Milley said violence in Afghanistan is low at present because of the Eid al Adha holiday, but after it concludes on July 23, the United States will have a better idea if the levels of violence will increase or whether there is a possibility of a negotiated outcome or Taliban takeover.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin noted that US forces are still on track to leave Afghanistan by the end of August, but a small, robust presence of American troops will remain in Kabul to provide security to the diplomatic facilities and the international airport.

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Russophobic Remarks By US State Dept. Counselor 'Wishful Thinking' - Russian Embassy

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US State Department Counselor Derek Chollet uttered russophobic remarks regarding Russia and Ukraine that simply represent "wishful thinking," the Russian Embassy in the United States said on Wednesday.

"The russophobic remarks by Derek Chollet are, to put it mildly, wishful thinking," the Russian Embassy said via Twitter. "He is obviously not familiar with the content of the talks between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in Geneva."

In interview with Ukrainian media, Chollet accused Russia of waging aggression against Ukraine and creating problems for negotiations to take place. Chollet also said Russia uses its energy resources as a weapon against Ukraine and as tool to exert pressure on Western Europe.

Russia has repeatedly rejected all accusations of involvement in the conflict in Ukraine and of weaponizing its energy resources.

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Top US General Says About Half of Afghanistan District Centers Under Taliban Control

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - About half of the district centers in Afghanistan are under the control of the Taliban movement (banned in Russia), Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Wednesday.

"As of today, more or less, I guess it's about 212, 214, it's in that range, the district centers are in Taliban control, it's about half of the 419 that are out there," Milley told reporters.

Milley said it appears the momentum is on the side of the Taliban since they have seized a significant amount of territory over the last six months, however, they have not taken over any of the 34 provincial capitals.

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Spain Arrests Briton for Twitter Hack on Biden And Other Accounts - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Spanish police have arrested at the request of the US authorities a Briton wanted in connection with a Twitter hack that compromised more than 100 high-profile accounts on the microblogging service, including that of President Joe Biden, the Justice Department announced on Wednesday.

UK citizen Joseph O'Connor, 22, was arrested "on multiple charges in connection with the July 2020 hack of Twitter that resulted in the compromise of more than 130 Twitter accounts, including those belonging to politicians, celebrities and companies," the Justice Department said in a statement.

The compromised accounts belonged to former President Barack Obama, investor Warren Buffett, Tesla chief Elon Musk and others, according to the statement.

The arrest comes after 18-year-old US citizen Graham Clark was sentenced in March to three years in prison following a guilty plea to various fraud charges in connection with the 2020 hack. Clark, who was 17 at the time of the offense, was able to raise 12.86 bitcoin, which was the equivalent of over \$117,000 at the time, by gaining access to high-profile Twitter accounts and asking followers to send bitcoin to a cryptocurrency account.

The Justice Department said in the statement that O'Connor, who was also sought for computer intrusions related to takeovers of TikTok and Snapchat user accounts, will be sentenced in the United States if he is convicted.

O'Connor is charged with three counts of conspiracy to intentionally access a computer without authorization and obtaining information from a protected computer; two counts of intentionally

accessing a computer without authorization and obtaining information from a protected computer; one count of conspiracy to intentionally access a computer without authorization and, with the intent to extort from a person a thing of value, transmitting a communication containing a threat, the statement said.

In addition, O'Connor faces another count of making extortive communications; one count of making threatening communications; and two counts of cyberstalking, the statement said.

Twitter said last year that it believed the hack was a coordinated social engineering attack by people who successfully targeted some of its employees with access to internal systems and tools. The company said at the time that the hackers accessed the direct message inbox for up to 36 of the accounts, which included one elected official in the Netherlands.

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US State Dept. Confident in Finding 'More Room' for Sanctions Against Cuba - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is confident there is more room for sanctions against the Cuban government in the context of its response to the ongoing protests, and is currently exploring options with Congress, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a press conference on Wednesday.

"I am not in the position to detail now what any potential sanctions might look like, what authorities we might use, but we're certainly looking at ways that we can hold accountable those Cuban regime officials who have been responsible for what we have seen... We are confident there is more room," Price said. "We are exploring options with the private sector and with Congress to that effect."

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Guterres Discussing With UN Security Council Possible Support for Haiti - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is in consultations with the UN Security Council regarding potential assistance the body can provide to Haiti after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the month, Haiti sent a letter to Guterres requesting to provide additional security support on the ground after the murder of Moise.

"We will be in touch with the members of the Security Council to see what kind of assistance they are looking to provide to Haiti. The letter has been received and is being examined and we're following up at this stage... with the members of the Security Council," Haq said.

The spokesperson noted that any decision to deploy additional assistance in Haiti should be authorized by the UN Security Council.

The United Nations ended its peacekeeping presence in Haiti in 2017 and two years later wrapped up a follow-up mission. The United Nations is currently present in Haiti through its integrated office (BINUH).

Haq said Guterres will address with the UN Security Council whether the United Nations requires stronger presence on the ground in Haiti.

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US Decided Not to Impede Nord Stream 2 Project to Avoid Alienating Germany - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration decided not to obstruct construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline because they realized sanctions would not work and wanted to avoid alienating Germany, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We have come to the conclusion, as any rational observer would, that sanctions are unlikely to stop the completion of the pipeline... that is why this administration determined that it was not in our interest to significantly undermine, weaken our bilateral relationship [with our ally Germany] for a pipeline, whose construction would continue nonetheless," Price told reporters.

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US to Complete Phasing Out Production of F-35 Parts in Turkey Within 1 Year - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to complete the phasing out of the F-35 jet parts produced in Turkey within a year and ramp up production in other places in order not to hurt the line globally, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"We are in a phase out part as you know after we ended the F-35 engagement. There were supply chain reasons to phase out the spare parts including the need to ramp up production elsewhere so that we didn't hurt the line globally," Nuland told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "I think we are within a year of not sooner of being finished there."

Nuland said Turkey took a significant economic and security hits from being suspended from the F-35 program as well as in terms of future jobs and potential exports.

"So, and particularly at a time when the Turkish economy is hurting in other areas, it was an interesting decision by the government," she added.

In April, US Defense Department spokesperson Jessica Maxwell told Sputnik that The United States is in the process of formally removing Turkey from the F-35 jet program even though it initially announced it would do so in July 2019.

The decision came as a result of Turkey's decision to purchase Russian-made S-400 air defense systems instead of the American Patriot missiles. The US Senate passed a bill blocking

the delivery of F-35 jets to Turkey on June 18, 2018, while the US government stopped all Turkish pilots training on the F-35 jet in the summer of 2019.

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US Crude Oil Stocks up First Time in 9 Weeks Amid Renewed COVID-19 Scare - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The stockpiles of US crude oil increased last week for the first time in nine weeks, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday amid a resurgence in coronavirus cases in the United States and in other parts of the world.

Crude inventories rose by 2.1 million barrels during the week that ended on July 16, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed.

The higher crude numbers came after eight straight weeks of drawdowns that removed more than 40 million barrels from stockpiles, sending US oil prices to four-year highs of almost \$78 a barrel as market punters predicted record fuel consumption.

Earlier this week, New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, tumbled almost 8 percent to under \$67 a barrel. WTI's sell-off on Monday, its worst in 16 months, came amid reports of a COVID resurgence from the Delta variant of the virus and after producer group OPEC+ announced a production hike from August onwards.

But in Wednesday's session, WTI was back up, rising almost 4 percent to just under \$70 a barrel by 11:30 a.m. ET (15:30 GMT) in what appeared to be a counter-risk rally to Monday's sell-off and despite the higher crude numbers released by the EIA.

The EIA said gasoline inventories also fell far less than expected last week, drawing just 121,000 barrels versus the 1.04 million-barrel drop forecast by analysts polled by US media. Stockpiles of distillates, which include diesel and heating oil, however, fell by 1.35 million barrels versus the expected 557,000.

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Berlin to Seek 10-Year Extension of Gas Transit Agreement Between Russia, Ukraine - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Under the US-German deal on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project Berlin will seek a ten-year extension of the agreement between Russia and Ukraine on gas transit, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Wednesday.

"The other aspect of this agreement is support for and extension of the transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine - as you know, it comes to an end in 2024. We will seek and press for and use full leverage to try to seek an additional 10 years for Ukraine," Nuland said in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations committee. "But, more broadly, we need to work

together to reduce Ukrainian dependence - both its economic dependence on transit, [and] its own dependence on Russian gas."

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Biden Will Meet Ukraine's Zelenskyy in Washington on August 30 - White House

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington on August 30, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Biden looks forward to welcoming President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine to the White House on August 30, 2021," the White House said in a press release.

The White House explained the visit will affirm the United States' and Ukraine's mutual interest to counter Russia and to cooperate on energy security.

Earlier on Wednesday, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Biden administration will announce the deal it struck with Germany concerning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

The United States has stood in opposition to the project since its beginning in 2012. Russia has repeatedly emphasized the pipeline is purely for economic purposes, meant to diversify the energy market.

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Nuland Says Germany Committed to Press EU Sanctions on Russia if Moscow Uses Gas as Weapon

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Germany has committed in the deal it reached with the United States on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to take action and pressure the European Union to act if Russia uses energy as weapon against Ukraine, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"Among other things Germany has committed in this agreement with us that should Russia attempt to use energy as a weapon or commit further aggressive acts against Ukraine, Germany will take actions at the national level and press for effective measures at the European level including sanctions to limit Russian export capabilities to Europe in the energy sector," Nuland told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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Biden Will Meet Ukraine's Zelenskyy in Washington on August 30 - White House

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Ukraine Would Be 'At More Risk ' Without US-German Nord Stream 2 Deal - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Ukraine would be at more risk without the US-German agreement on Nord Stream 2, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Wednesday.

"I, as you know, as a long-time friend and supporter of Ukraine believe that if we had not this agreement with the pipeline 90 percent complete, Ukraine would be at considerably more risk, " Nuland said in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations.

Russian officials have repeatedly said the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is for purely commercial, not political, purposes.

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UN Chief Sends Letters to Germany's Merkel, China's Xi Over Deadly Floods - Spokesmen

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has sent letters to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chinese leader Xi Jinping to convey his condolences over the loss of life during the devastating floods the two countries, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Secretary-General has been concerned by recent devastating floods in different parts of the world and has been in touch with the leaders accordingly," Haq said. "The Secretary-General sent a letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel to express his condolences for the lives lost due to these floods and his sympathies to all those who have suffered losses... And the Secretary-General is sending a letter to President Xi Jinping to convey his heartfelt condolences on the tragic loss of lives and devastation."

Deadly floods in Germany caused by heavy rains affected most of western Europe last week. The German states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony and Bavaria have been damaged the most, with reports of dozens of casualties and severe damage to public and private infrastructure. The latest death toll from disastrous flooding exceeds 160, while hundreds of people are still missing.

Over the weekend, China has also been hit by heavy rains and flooding that resulted in at least 25 deaths in the province of Henan. Over 160,000 people were evacuated, according to the provincial authorities.

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Washington, Ukraine Engaged in Intensive Talks on US-German Nord Stream 2 Deal - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has been intensively engaged with Ukraine amid Washington and Germany's work on the deal concerning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Wednesday.

"Throughout this process we have engaged in intensive consultations with the Ukrainians... on their requirements and on their vulnerabilities as we worked on this with the Germans," Nuland said in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations committee.

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US Not Buying Fighter Aircraft Fast Enough to Replace Aging Fleet - Air Force General

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States was not buying new combat fighter planes at a fast enough rate to replace its more than a quarter century old aging fleet, US Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Planning and Programs Lt. Gen. David Nahom said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We are not buying fighters fast enough that are falling off due to age," Nahom told a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on Navy and Air Force weapons systems divestments.

"Forty-four percent of Air Force aircraft are flying beyond their initial service life.

Nahom said the US Air Force fleet had an average age of 28 years which was the oldest of any service and it still included many earlier versions of the F-15 jet, which first flew nearly half a century ago in 1972. Many of them were reaching a point where they could no longer be renewed for more service, he said.

"In the modernized F-15X, "We are benefiting from billions of dollars of Saudi and Qatari investment into that platform for future warfare defense of the homeland and carry outsize weapons we've got to get these units," Nahom said.

However, F-15C jets were now flying far too long beyond their initial service life, Nahom added.

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US to Officially Announce Deal With Germany on Nord Stream 2 Later on Wednesday - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States later on Wednesday will officially unveil its deal with Germany on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland told the Senate Foreign Relations committee.

" Later this afternoon we will make public the agreement that we have with the German government," Nuland said.

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US to Issue Invitation to Ukraine's Zelenskyy to Discuss Nord Stream 2 - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US government will issue an invitation to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy later on Wednesday to discuss Kiev's concerns about the Nord Stream 2 pipeline deal reached between the United States and Germany, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"None of us has been pressuring Ukraine, and in fact, an invitation to President Zelenskyy is going to be issued publicly later today, and we have been in deep consultations with the Ukrainians on every aspect of this arrangement," Nuland told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday.

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North America Cross-Border Freight Recovers to Pre-Pandemic Levels - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Truck and rail freight crossing the US borders with both Canada and Mexico in May nearly matched levels of May 2019 prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the Transportation Department said on Wednesday.

"Total Transborder freight: \$108.6 billion of transborder freight moved by all modes of transportation, up 93.8 percent compared to May 2020 but remained 1 percent below May 2019," the Transportation Department said in a press release.

Trucks moved \$68 billion of freight, up 73.6 percent compared to May 2020, and down just 1.4 percent compared with \$68.9 billion in May 2019, the release said.

The second most-used mode, railways moved \$15.9 billion of freight, up 190.3 percent compared to May 2020, but down 2.2 percent compared to \$16.3 billion in May 2019, the release said.

Crossing the US-Canada border in both directions, trucks moved freight valued at \$30.9 billion in May, railroads \$8.5 billion, pipelines \$6.2 billion and aircraft \$3.1 billion, the release added.

Across the US-Mexico border, trucks moved freight worth \$37.1 billion, railroads \$7.5 billion, ships \$6.0 billion, planes \$1.4 billion and pipelines \$700 million, according to the release.

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US Working With UN Envoy on Turkish, Russian Mercenaries Withdrawal From Libya - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy in Libya Jan Kubis regarding the coordinated withdrawal of Turkish and Russian mercenaries from the war-torn country, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"Both Turkey and Russia [at the highest level] have said that they are willing to support the withdrawal of mercenary force, but they want to do it in tandem with each other," Nuland told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We are working with the current UN envoy, Mr. Kubis, on how that might work."

The United States is hopeful for progress on withdrawal of mercenaries from Libya well before the general election in the country, which is due to happen at the end of the year, Nuland added.

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China Offensive Threat Growing Faster Than US Projected in 2018 - Air Force General

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - China is building up its offensive air capabilities far faster than US military planners expected in their National Defense Strategy three years ago, Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Planning and Programs Lt. Gen. David Nahom told Congress on Wednesday.

"The threat is accelerating much more than we thought back in 2018," Nahom told a US Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on Navy and Air Force weapons systems divestments. China was pushing ahead as fast as it could to expand its military power including air combat capabilities, Nahom told the hearing.

"China's actions show a sense of urgency, a massive buildup of military power and a willingness to use that power," Nahom said.

The US Air Force has said it plans to divest more than 200 aircraft with its fiscal 2022 budget request. Air Force leaders have said they want to use the cuts to free up \$1.3 billion to reinvest in their sixth-generation fighter, hypersonic weapons and other emerging technologies.

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US Whistleblower Wins \$3M In Reward For Reporting Corporate Wrongdoing - Regulator

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - A whistleblower who reported corporate malfeasance and then aided officials pursuing a successful enforcement action won a \$3 million award for the effort, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Wednesday.

"The whistleblower alerted the SEC to previously unknown conduct and then provided substantial additional assistance, which conserved a considerable amount of SEC resources," acting Office of the Whistleblower Chief Emily Pasquinelli said in a press release.

The \$3 million brings total rewards to about \$942 million for 186 individuals since the program began in 2012, the release said.

Whistleblower awards can range from 10 percent to 30 percent of the money collected when the monetary sanctions exceed \$1 million, the release added.

The SEC said it withholds information that could identify the whistleblower or penalized corporations, according to the release.

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UN Security Council Condemns in Strongest Terms Deadly Baghdad Terror Attack - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Wednesday condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attack in Baghdad earlier this week.

"The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the cowardly terrorist attack in Baghdad, Iraq, on Monday, 19 July 2021. The attack, which was claimed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant [IS, banned in Russia], resulted in at least 30 deaths and at least 50 injured," the Security Council said in a statement.

The Security Council also stressed the need to hold the perpetrators accountable and bring them to justice.

The explosion occurred in the densely populated Sadr City district of Iraq on Monday.

This was the third bombing attack in Sadr City this year alone, with the first two taking place in January and June. At least 30 people have been killed, and some 60 others were injured by the latest blast.

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US to Suspend Jerusalem Consulate Re-Opening Until Israel Passes Budget - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will suspend the re-opening of its consulate in Jerusalem until the new government passes a budget, Axios reported on Wednesday.

The US government made its decision at Israel's request, the report said. The budget should be adopted not later than early November, otherwise the government has little chance to stay in office, it added.

In May, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced the United States' plans to reopen its consulate in Jerusalem.

The consulate was merged with the US embassy in Israel during the presidency of Donald Trump. Previously, the consulate, which has operated in East Jerusalem for decades, was the United States' main diplomatic mission for the Palestinians.

Palestinian officials have accepted Washington's decision but only until the new budget is passed, the report said citing US and Palestinian sources.

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Turkey Forces at Kabul Airport 'Vital' for US Maintaining Diplomatic Presence - Nuland

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Turkey's intention to keep troops at the Kabul airport is necessary for the United States and its allies to maintain diplomatic presence in Afghanistan after the US pullout, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"Most recently, Turkey has expressed interest in maintaining a robust force at Kabul's airport as the US and NATO military missions in Afghanistan come to an end," Nuland told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "This contribution is vital to ensuring we and our allies and partners can maintain a strong diplomatic presence in Kabul after our troops withdraw.

Following discussions between Presidents Biden and Erdogan at the NATO summit last month, technical teams on both sides are working together to finalize this critical arrangement."

On Monday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey intends to hold negotiations with the Taliban movement (banned in Russia) about its possible military presence in Afghanistan.

Erdogan expressed belief that the Taliban is behaving not in the way some Muslims behave toward others and urged the movement to abandon the occupation policy in relation to their own brothers.

Earlier, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said no final decision was made yet on Ankara's possible assistance to secure the Kabul airport.

The Taliban has said that it opposes the deployment of Turkish troops and sees such a development as a violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the Afghan military spokesperson Gen. Ajmal Shinwari said the country's armed forces will be in charge of ensuring airport security.

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Turkey Risks Further Sanctions for Any New Arms Purchases From Russia - Senior US Diplomat

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Turkey could face additional sanctions under the US CAATSA legislation if Ankara acquires new arms from Russia, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in testimony at a Senate Foreign Relations hearing on Wednesday.

"We continue to object to Turkey's purchase and deployment of the Russian S-400 air defense system and have made clear that any new major arms purchases from Russia risk triggering additional CAATSA sanctions. Sale and co-production of the F-35 will remain suspended," Nuland said.

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US, Israel Begin 2-Week Exercise Juniper Falcon on Friday - European Command

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US military assets began arriving in Israel for a two-week exercise with the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) that begins on Friday, the European Command (EUCOM) said on Wednesday.

"Two US Air Force C-130J Super Hercules aircraft from the 37th Airlift Squadron, Ramstein Air Base, Germany, arrived in Israel last night with US Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa Airmen and equipment to support Exercise Juniper Falcon 2021-2 beginning July 23 at various locations in Israel," EUCOM said in a press release.

The exercise marks a continuation of the Juniper Falcon exercises following a series of drills earlier this year, the release said.

The upcoming exercise is designed to test simulated emergency response procedures, ballistic missile defense and crisis response assistance in the defense of Israel, the release added. While the exercise is driven by overall dynamics in the Middle East, the release emphasized that the drills do not represent a response to any recent developments or specific real-world events.

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UN Says Global Tourism Decreased in First 5 Months of 2021 Despite Slight Recovery in May

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) said in a press release on Wednesday that international travel decreased by 460 million arrivals during the first five months of this year relative to pre-coronavirus pandemic levels despite a small uptick in May.

"The latest UNWTO data shows that over the first five months of the year, world destinations recorded 147 million fewer international arrivals (overnight visitors) compared to the same period of 2020, or 460 million less than pre-pandemic year of 2019," the release said. "However,

the data does point to a relatively small upturn in May, with arrivals declining by 82 percent (versus May 2019), after falling by 86 percent in April."

UNWTO said the slight upward trend in May is due to the fact that some countries started to ease restrictions on travel they had imposed earlier.

Asia and the Pacific continued to see the largest decline in international arrivals with a 95 percent drop in the first five months of 2021, compared to the same period in 2019, the release said.

Out of the 63 destinations with their borders still completely closed for international arrivals, 33 were in Asia and the Pacific, and only seven in Europe, the release said.

Europe, which now has the fewest restrictions on travel, suffered the second largest decline of 85 percent in international arrivals, followed by the Middle East with 83 percent and Africa with 81 percent. The Americas saw a cooperatively smaller decline of 72 percent.

While international tourism is slowly picking up, UNWTO said experts do not predict it to return to the pre-pandemic 2019 levels before 2023.

Meanwhile, domestic travel is seeing a recovery in many places, especially in China and Russia, where domestic air seat capacity has already exceeded pre-coronavirus levels, according to the release.

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Current Pace of COVID-19 Vaccinations Will Not Halt Pandemic By End of 2022 - IMF Chief

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The current pace of the coronavirus vaccinations worldwide will not stop the pandemic by the end of 2022, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Wednesday.

"It is so clear that we are on the pace we are today not going to end the pandemic by the end of next year," Georgieva said during virtual discussion at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Georgieva said the world may face new variants of the novel coronavirus and urged speeding up the pace of vaccinations.

The IMF managing Director pointed out that different countries may recover faster than others depending on economic conditions they face.

"As we are now coming, hopefully, to the recovery from the pandemic, countries are going to be faced with high deficits and high debts," Georgieva said. "It will be paramount to secure the revenues that allow the support of the recovery and media-term fiscal sustainability."

Georgieva also welcomed the international agreement on corporate tax and the progress in the discussions on implementing a digital tax.

The finance ministers from the G20 group of industrialized nations endorsed the agreement reached their in-person meeting that will set a global minimum tax of at least 15 percent to prevent multinational corporations from shifting their profits to tax havens. A framework deal is expected by the G20 leaders' summit in October.

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Positive Ratings of Black-White Racial Relations in US Hit 20-Year Low - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US adults' views of relations between Black and White Americans dropped to the lowest level of optimism in surveys dating back to 2001, a Gallup poll said on Wednesday.

"Currently, 42 percent of Americans say relations between the two groups are 'very' or 'somewhat' good, while 57 percent say they are 'somewhat' or 'very' bad," according to a press release explaining the poll.

While the most recent rating of Black-White relations in the United States is not statistically different from last year's 44 percent, the reading has eroded nine percentage points over the past two years as the nation has grappled with the murder of George Floyd, the subsequent nationwide protests and growing calls for racial justice, the release said.

As recently as 2001, 70 percent of US adults rated Black-White relations positively. That changed in recent years following multiple high-profile killings of unarmed Black people by police officers around the United States, the release added.

The survey results are based on telephone interviews conducted June 1-July 5, 2021 with a random sample of 1,381 adults, ages 18+, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia, including oversamples of Black and Hispanic adults. The total sample is weighted to represent racial and ethnic groups proportionately to their share of the US population. For results based on this sample of national adults, the margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, according to Gallup.

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Spain Arrests UK Citizen at US Request Over 2020 Twitter Hack - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Spanish police have arrested at the request of US authorities a Briton wanted in connection with a Twitter hack last year that compromised more than 100 high-profile accounts on the microblogging service, the Justice Department announced on Wednesday.

Joseph O'Connor, 22, was arrested "on multiple charges in connection with the July 2020 hack of Twitter that resulted in the compromise of over 130 Twitter accounts, including those belonging to politicians, celebrities and companies," the Justice Department said in a statement. O'Connor, also charged with computer intrusions related to takeovers of TikTok and Snapchat user accounts and for cyberstalking a juvenile victim, will be sentenced in the United States if convicted, it added.

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US Extends Ban on Non-Essential Travel via Canada, Mexico Borders Until August 21 - DHS

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is extending its ban on non-essential travel via its land borders with Canada and Mexico until at least August 21, the US Homeland Security Department (DHS) said on Wednesday.

"These restrictions go into effect at 12 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) on July 22, 2021 and will remain in effect until 11:59 p.m. EDT on August 21, 2021, unless amended or rescinded prior to that time," DHS said in a notification.

The notification means that the United States will not at present be reciprocating Canada's move to open its border to vaccinated US citizens and permanent residents, who will be eligible to enter Canada through land borders for recreational purposes beginning on August 9.

Canadian and Mexican citizens have been barred from entering the United States via the country's land borders since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020.

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US Aid to Renters of \$1.5Bln in June Tops Total for Entire Coronavirus Pandemic - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US government distributed more than \$1.5 billion in Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) to 290,000 households impacted by the coronavirus crisis in June, topping the total for all prior months of the pandemic, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"More than \$1.5 billion in assistance was delivered to eligible households in the month of June, more than the assistance provided all three previous reporting periods combined," the Treasury Department said in a press release. "The number of households served in June grew by about 85 percent over the previous month and nearly tripled since April."

The increase reflects efforts by state and local governments, as well as other grantees such as tribal agencies, to hire staff and build systems to distribute the aid, the release said.

Across the country, programs are being established to provide funds in the short-term, as the federal eviction moratorium expires at the end of July, the release added.

In addition ERA provided by the American Rescue plan will continue until 2025, according to the release.